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ABSTRACT

With the purpose of highlighting the lessons to be learned from immersion programs, this digest presents selected findings from research carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of immersion programs in Canada and the United States. These lessons are related to the importance of: (1) integrating language with content instruction (when second language instruction is integrated with instruction in academic content, it is more effective than teaching the language in isolation); (2) creating classroom environments that are discourse-rich (providing opportunities for extended student discourse, especially discourse associated with activities selected by individual students, can be particularly beneficial for second language learning); and (3) systematically planning language instruction along with content instruction. (Contains seven references.) (JL)

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ERIC Digest

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Digest

December 1995

Integrating Language and Content: Lessons from Immersion (EDO-FL-96-04)

National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning

This Digest is based on a report published by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, *Integrating Language and Content: Lessons from Immersion*, by Fred Genesee. Copies of the report are available from NCRCDSLL, 1118 22nd St. NW, Washington, DC 20037.

One of the most interesting innovations to emerge in second language education during the last three decades is the language immersion program. In this method of language instruction, the regular school curriculum is taught through the medium of a second language. The first immersion programs were developed in Canada to provide English-speaking students with the opportunity to learn French, Canada's other official language. Since that time, immersion programs have been adopted in many parts of North America, and alternative forms of immersion have been devised. In the United States, immersion programs can be found in a number of languages, including French, German, Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese.

With the purpose of highlighting the lessons to be learned from immersion, this Digest presents selected findings from research carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of immersion programs in Canada and the United States. These lessons are related to the importance of (1) integrating language with content instruction, (2) creating classroom environments that are discourse-rich, and (3) systematically planning language instruction along with content instruction.

Language Integration Over Isolation

The first lesson to be learned from immersion is that when second language instruction is integrated with instruction in academic content, it is more effective than teaching the language in isolation. Proficiency in the target language is not a prerequisite to academic development; rather, language learning results from using language to perform authentic communicative functions.

During the last 10 years, there has been a shift away from teaching language in isolation to integrating language and content instruction. There are at least four reasons for this shift. First, language is acquired most effectively when it is learned for communication in meaningful and significant social situations. The academic content of the school curriculum can provide a meaningful basis for second language learning, given that the content is of interest or value to the learners.

Second, the integration of language and content instruction provides a substantive basis for language learning. Important and interesting content, academic or otherwise, gives students a meaningful basis for understanding and acquiring new language structures and patterns. In addition, authentic classroom communication provides a purposeful and motivating context for learning the communicative functions of the new language. In the absence of content and authentic communication, language can be learned only as an abstraction devoid of conceptual or communicative substance.

A third reason for the shift toward language and content integration is the relationship between language and other aspects of human development. Language, cognition, and social awareness develop concurrently in young children. Integrated second language instruction seeks to keep these components of development together so that second language learning is an integral part of social and cognitive development in school settings.

Finally, knowing how to use language in one social context or academic domain does not necessarily mean knowing how to use it in others. The integration of second language instruction with subject content respects the specificity of language use. For example, evidence indicates that the way language is used in particular academic domains, such as mathematics (Spanos, Rhodes, Dale, & Crandall, 1988), is not the same in other academic domains, such as social studies (Short, 1994).

A variety of integrated approaches to second language teaching have been developed. Immersion is a specific type of integrated instruction. The primary focus of immersion is not language learning but academic instruction. Immersion programs have proved to be successful; the academic achievement of immersion students is comparable to that of students educated through their native language. This indicates that the students in immersion programs acquire the second language skills they need to master the academic skills and information appropriate for their grade level.

Opportunities to Use the Target Language

The second lesson to emerge from research on immersion is that approaches that provide opportunities for extended student discourse, especially discourse associated with activities selected by individual students, can be particularly beneficial for second language learning.

Research on French immersion programs in Canada has shown that immersion students often perform as well as native French-speaking students on tests of French reading and listening comprehension. However, they seldom achieve the same high levels of competence in speaking and writing. Although functionally effective, the oral and written skills of immersion students indicate a number of shortcomings. Immersion students' grammar is less complex and less redundant than that of native speakers and is influenced by English grammar. The available studies suggest that this results, in part, from learning environments in which there is a lack of opportunity to engage in extended discourse.

The solution to the shortcomings in immersion students' productive skills seems to lie in the use of methodologies that

apply techniques to practice language forms with a communicative approach. "Such tasks and activities will meet the same criteria as is demanded of the communicative teaching of grammar: purposefulness, interactivity, creativity, and unpredictability" (Clipperton, 1994, p. 746).

Activity-centered immersion programs, particularly those that focus on individual choice of learning activity, achieve high levels of second language proficiency even in the productive skills. Stevens (1976) compared students who worked on self-selected activities in collaboration or consultation with other students and who were expected to make oral and written reports in the target language on their work with students who all worked on the same teacher-directed activities at the same time and in the same way. Although students in the activity-centered program used the target language for only 40% of the school day, they attained the same levels of target language speaking and reading proficiency and almost the same levels of reading and writing proficiency as the students in the teacher-centered program, which provided all instruction in the target language. The success of the activity-centered classes can be attributed to two main factors: 1) students had regular opportunities for extended discourse; and 2) students were highly motivated because they used the target language in situations of personal choice.

In sum, the use of instructional strategies and academic tasks that encourage increased interaction among learners and between learners and teachers is likely to be beneficial for second language learning.

Effective Curriculum Design

The third lesson to be learned from immersion is that the integration of language and academic objectives should be carefully planned, providing for the presentation, practice, and application of specific language forms that are necessary for discussing different academic content. If integrated instruction is not planned systematically, teachers may use strategies that are not optimal for promoting full second language development. Swain (1988) examined how immersion teachers used French to teach a variety of academic subjects. The study found that teachers used a functionally restricted set of language patterns, corrected content more often than linguistic form, and were inconsistent in their corrections of linguistic form. These results suggest that in an effort to make academic material as comprehensible as possible, immersion teachers might be adopting communication strategies that rely on linguistic skills their students already have, and students may not be challenged to learn new language skills. In order to develop the students' language skills fully, immersion teachers must progressively model more complex language and use instructional activities that demand more complex language skills from students.

Instructional strategies and tasks must be carefully selected so that students use and learn targeted aspects of the language. Without such systematic plans, teachers may provide inconsistent or even random information about language forms. A systematic focus on the structural aspects of the language greatly enhances learning of targeted grammatical features.

Increased attention to language forms does not mean less focus on communication and meaning. Salomone (1992) reports on an immersion program in the United States that "exemplifies the current trend of all second language instruction: using the second language rather than knowing about the language, with bilingualism as the ultimate instructional goal" (p. 9). However, having verified a lack of accuracy and a continued "fossilization" in the students' speech, teachers in the program studied by Salomone incorporated systematic planning and explicit teaching of the grammar and vocabulary component of the syllabus. This strategy greatly improved the results. Other studies describe the specifics of direct language instruction in an immersion context (e.g., Clipperton, 1994; Laplante, 1993) or show the benefits of identifying the semantic and syntactic features and language functions and tasks that are part of the academic language for a content area and incorporating them in the design of lesson plans (Short, 1994).

Conclusion

Experiences in immersion classes illuminate the practice of second language teaching and indicate effective ways of attaining high levels of academic content mastery and target language proficiency. Evaluations of a variety of immersion programs suggest at least three elements of general relevance for second language instruction: 1) instructional approaches that integrate content and language are likely to be more effective than approaches in which language is taught in isolation; 2) an activity-centered approach that creates opportunities for extended student discourse is likely to be beneficial for second language learning; and 3) language objectives should be systematically targeted along with academic objectives in order to maximize language learning.

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